

**OPENING STATEMENT FOR THE HONORABLE GREGG HARPER,
CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
INVESTIGATIONS
MAY 23, 2018 HEARING ON
“Examining the Olympic Community’s Ability to Protect Athletes from
Sexual Abuse.”**

(As prepared for delivery)

Today, the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations is holding a hearing entitled, “Examining the Olympic Community’s Ability to Protect Athletes from Sexual Abuse.” We are here because recent events have highlighted a very troubling and concerning pattern of sexual misconduct within the U.S. Olympic Community. There have been breakdowns and failures in the system to protect athletes, including in how allegations of sexual misconduct have been handled by the National Governing Bodies—the groups that run individual sports—and the U.S. Olympic Committee.

The USOC and NGBs play a role in keeping millions of American athletes safe from harm. The vast majority of the athletes involved in NGBs will never compete in the Olympics. They’re on teams affiliated with an NGB, or play in NGB-sponsored events. This can include little league teams, local tennis tournaments or gymnastics competitions. They are, in many instances, children. But they still fall within the parameters of “organized sport.” So when we talk about athlete safety, we aren’t just talking about elite athletes representing their country at the highest levels of their competition. We are also talking about our friends, our neighbors, our kids.

This is why athlete safety must be the top priority of the USOC and NGBs, and why they should have robust policies and procedures in place that reflect this priority. More importantly, these policies and procedures must be followed—otherwise they aren’t worth the paper they are written on—and the culture must be such that our athletes feel safe and protected. Sadly, we’ve seen what can happen when athlete safety is not a priority.

Too often it seems that the USOC and NGBs haven’t acted until they are publicly pressured to do so. When you have survivors saying that they were asked to stay silent, felt like they weren’t heard, and didn’t feel safe – there is something wrong with the system.

Sexual abuse is a problem our society must confront. According to the CDC's statistics on sexual violence, one in three women and one in six men experience sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes. While much focus has been on USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, gymnastics is not the only NGB that has had its challenges. Recent public reports also include the Lopez brothers in Taekwondo, Rick Butler in Volleyball, and the multiple accusations that have come from the Swimming community, as well as reports in many other NGBs not before us today.

Historically, each NGB and the USOC were responsible for directly handling any complaints, allegations, or reports of sexual abuse within their respective sport. However, policies, procedures, and bylaws weren't consistent across all NGBs and it's unclear whether there was adequate oversight to ensure that the applicable policies and procedures were followed.

There have been some recent changes to improve how allegations of sexual misconduct are handled in the Olympic community. The USOC has used working groups to make recommendations for promoting and protecting athletes. Through these working groups, new policies and procedures were developed, and the U.S. Center for SafeSport (Center) was created by the USOC and launched in March 2017. Now all NGBs and the USOC are required to report all complaints or allegations that involve sexual misconduct to the Center for investigation.

Over the course of this investigation, the Committee has spoken with many survivors, and their experiences have informed and shaped our work. These conversations—and the thousands of pages of documents provided to the Committee by survivors and whistleblowers—helped shed light on the pervasive problem of sexual abuse in organized sport, and prompted the Committee to request documents from all 48 national governing bodies and the USOC.

We greatly appreciate all the assistance that the survivors have provided. Our job, now, is to do everything we can to protect our athletes. This hearing will serve as an opportunity to review whether the USOC and NGBs have adequate policies and procedures in place to protect athletes from sexual abuse. These organizations are directly responsible for the safety of athletes. It is of the utmost importance to hold them accountable for their past failings and ensure that safety is their top priority going forward. It is time to change the culture, once and for all.

I'd like to welcome all of our witnesses and thank you for being here today. I know that this isn't an easy topic, but it's one that we need to address to keep our nation's athletes safe. We look forward to hearing your testimony.

I would also like to thank the Ranking Member of Subcommittee, Ms. DeGette, and other minority members and staff for their hard work and assistance on this bipartisan investigation. I now recognize the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Ms. DeGette.